

8-17-07

New subject:

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The first use of nuclear weapons, of course, is far behind us. Also the second, both sixty-seven years ago. But the next use will not be the third, as some suppose. That, according to Harry Truman, author of the first two, took place just a year later. It involved Iran. The fourth and fifth uses, still under Truman, [Berlin; Korea] occurred in the next four years, still under Truman, followed by perhaps thirty others up till the present.

In each of these cases since the uses against Japan (and including those as well) our presidents have used our nuclear weapons in the precise way that a gun is used when it is pointed at someone's head in a confrontation. It is being used whether or not the trigger is pulled. Indeed, to get one's way without having to pull the trigger is generally the best way to get the use out of a gun, the best reason for owning it.

Summary: thirty (?) uses.

All bluffs?

Of course, Truman did pull the trigger on Japan, but the conscious purpose of that was to support a threat. His advisors saw no military advantage to destroying either of the first two target-cities (they were chosen in part because they had been preserved from earlier targeting—chosen for the purpose of demonstrating the Bomb's effects on a previously undamaged city precisely because there was no urgent military reason to hit them otherwise. That was not what Truman first announced to the American public—he lied—but the Japanese, and the Soviets, understood it. The sole objective was coercive; the attacks were to demonstrate to the Japanese (and, for the longer run, the Soviets) both the effects to be expected from atomic attacks, and the president's readiness to launch *more* of them.

Few if any of the president's advisors expected that one or two bombs would be enough to bring about unconditional surrender (by themselves, apart from the possible effects of Soviet entry into the war, or change in surrender terms by the U.S.). Thus they were preparing for many more: a third within days, followed, as the bombs went into regular production, by another every few weeks. McCloy estimated that—ignoring other possible factors—about ten might be needed, which would take till the end of the year. The Japanese civilian deaths from these would not have been the 300,000 alone from Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I have never seen an estimate. But the bombs were being produced, and—absent the Japanese surrender in August—there is no reason to believe they would not have been dropped.

Whether the first two uses had any effect on the shortening of the war at all—compared to or in addition to the effects of the Soviet entry on August 8, and the indications by the U.S. high command that the Emperor would be allowed to remain—is still a matter of

expert controversy. But if they did have an effect (as the great majority of the public was led to believe, by official accounts which were highly manipulative), it was surely as threats, demonstrative threats of more to come, or as Truman put it, "A rain of destruction such as the world has never seen." The destruction wrought by the two bombs themselves was not new to the Japanese; more civilians had been killed in one night, March 9-10 1945, in the firebombing of Tokyo five months earlier than died initially in either Hiroshima or Nagasaki or perhaps even the two together.

(Still the lying description had a mixed impact on the future, not all bad...It established the supposed principle that not much less than the alternative prospect of a million U.S. deaths had justified or could justify the use of a nuclear weapons, the deaths of so many civilian victims. That was not the perspective of Truman and Byrnes, privately, but they didn't contradict this impression but rather fostered it. It obviously was not an available rationale for carrying out a threat to bomb Russia or Iran over Azerbaijan, but that didn't mean that Truman's threat could not have carried any weight with the Soviets. (Whether it actually did or not—or whether the threat was actually passed on, as Truman claimed—is not documented. That does not mean it did not occur. And in particular, it does not mean that Truman did not so remember it, as he claimed, as a success, and an inducement to use a nuclear threat again soon after, over Berlin. But the public misapprehension as to the conditions in the minds of their leaders for legitimate nuclear attacks was from that day to more recent times, an inhibiting factor against presidents' making their threat-uses public and, no doubt, against their readiness to carry them out. That may have changed. At least, presidential behavior—and for that matter, the willingness of presidential candidates and leaders in Congress to talk openly about the possible use of nuclear weapons in preventive attacks—has changed strikingly in the last six years; and that change may outlast the present administration.

Thus, we have used nuclear weapons repeatedly in the Middle East and elsewhere over the last sixty years, and we are using them now, again in a crisis over Iran. That recurrence in the Middle East is no coincidence. Iran, along with Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, represents the most valuable real estate on the face of the earth, sitting, like those others, on top of a sea of oil. There is no greater material, profitable and strategic prize on earth than the control of that oil, the largest and most accessible reserves on the planet.

And Iran itself is now governed by a regime markedly independent of the United States, even unfriendly to it. That was not true for most of the sixty years, but then it was a neighbor of our then-adversary the Soviet Union. There was no way—throughout the Cold War—for the U.S. to prevent the Soviets from dominating Iran and its oil by armed force, if they chose to, other than by threatening or if necessary attacking with nuclear weapons. That was why, Harry Truman explained, he brought the region to the brink of nuclear war in 1946, a year after Hiroshima and Nagasaki.